

Bhagat Puran Singh

A SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE

As Assessment by

- S. Bhagat Singh (Retd. Judge)
- Diwan Anand Kumar M. A.
- S. Narain Singh M. A.
- V. N. Narayanan
- P. P. S. Gill
- S. Khushwant Singh
- Bibi Amrit Kaur
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- Usha Pratap Singh

Whatever you have received more than others in health, in talents, in ability, in success, in a pleasant childhood, in harmonious conditions of home life, all this you must not take as a matter of course. In gratitude for your fortune, you must render in return some sacrifice of your own life for other lives.

—Albert Schweitzer.

Publisher

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FOREWORD

This booklet contains a number of articles, relating to Bhagat Puran Singh Ji which were written during his life time by eminent intellectuals and writers like Diwan Anand Kumar, Ex-Vice Chancellor, Punjab University; Sh. V. N. Narayanan, Editor-in-Chief, Daily Tribune; S. Khushwant Singh and several others.

The service and dedication of Bhagat Puran Singh to the suffering humanity influenced these authors so deeply that their pens were impelled to laud the Bhagatji for his great mission he embarked upon.

This great Samaritan is no more amongst us today, yet Pingalwara Ashram—a godly aegis for hundreds of distitutes and incurably sick people—is carrying on the ideals of Bhagatji under the supervision of his successor and present President, Dr. Inderjit Kaur with the same fervour and enthusiasm as was seen formerly. She is assisted and co-operated in this great task by her colleagues who are equally devoted to this momentous cause.

On Bhagatji's passing away, his work and mission were greatly admired by all the political and social leaders, and were highlighted by the print media of the Punjab. But, it is regretted to mention that the role of the Delhi-based newspapers, barring Indian Express, has been quite disappointing.

Proper it were, that the achievements of Bhagatji should have been given enough coverage in print as well as electronic media so as to make the un-knowing populace aware that the periphery of the service of this Messiah is no way smaller than anyone else.

In this context, S. Khushwant Singh for his tribute to Bhagatji in his column in Indian Express

dated August 15, 1992 and Sh. V.N. Narayanan for his article in the Sunday Tribune dated August 1, 1993 deserve particular appreciation.

This booklet also contains two articles from that number of the Sikh 'Vision', an American Journal, which are written in dedication to Bhagatji.

Bhagatji's contribution in fostering awareness about the impending hazards of pollution in the environment is of no mean significance. Much before the scientists the world over became conscious of the enormity of the matter, Bhagat Puran Singh rang the knell of the disintegrating eco-system of this planet. By publishing pamphlets, and distributing these freely everywhere, he strove to make the people aware of the approaching doom. He was a pathfinder in this direction who worked earnestly for the safety and preservation of the Adam's race.

Being his contemporary we may fail to assess his invaluable works, but the posterity shall reckon him as the greatest benefactor of all times.

Inderjit Singh 'Baghi'
Hon'y. Chief Administrator
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Amritsar.

BHAGAT PURAN SINGH

A Servant of the people

An Assessment By S. Bhagat Singh,
District and Sessions Judge (Retired)

(Written in February 1957)

Any visitor to the city of Amritsar who keeps his eyes open, cannot fail to notice black wooden boxes, bearing crude writings in white in Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu and English, placed in crossings and public thoroughfares, reminding him of the duty he owes to his brethren, the sick and suffering, the aged and the infirm. At some places he may come across large wooden black-boards bearing extensive writings of a similar type seeking to strike a sympathetic chord in him or containing a homily on civics and morality, religion and philosophy. If he were to pause and read, he would surely find that these are the insignia of Pingalwara (literally a home of the cripple)—a unique institution founded by an equally unique person. He is a tall, shabbily dressed man, who may be found tramping with his wooden sandals or riding a rickshaw, along with an invalid. He always carries a brassbell hanging by his side and announcing his arrival. This man, you may call him a superman, even an angel, goes by the name of Bhagat Puran Singh. He was born and brought up in a Hindu family of village Rajewal (Rohnon) in Ludhiana district but he found greater solace and inspiration in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, when, in spite of his intense passion for learning, poverty forced him to discontinue his studies in the tenth class of a high school. So he adapted his erstwhile worldly dreams, for their fulfilment, to a nobler atmosphere of spirit that the Gurdwara Dehra Sahib of Guru Arjan Dev and

Shahid Ganj of Bhai Mani Singh, the prince among the martyrs, provided him at Lahore. He, therefore, lost no time in taking a vow of celibacy dedicating his life to the service of suffering humanity. He started at Lahore his career of social and humanitarian activities.

This was in the year 1924 when Puran Singh was hardly a youth of 19. Since then he has been indefatigably carrying on his altruistic activities, day and night in scorching heat and biting cold, in rains and under dust storms, undeterred by adversities, undaunted by criticism, and unruffled by the obstacles that crop up on the path of social service. His enthusiasm knows no bounds and his determination remains unshaken. Friend of the forlorn, helper of the helpless, a ready nurse for a patient of any disease however loathsome, infectious, unmindful of his personal health; safety or convenience, making not the slightest distinction on the basis of caste, creed or community regarding the person in need of his service; this single man has, by his example and precept, inspired many and with their co-operation has, in a short space of nine years, built from a scratch what may justly claim to be an institution.

You may not know Bhagat Ji, but if he were to come to sense you as a man who can assist him in furtherance of his noble cause, even to a small extent, he is sure to find you out, and may even urge you to help and contribute to his cause. To the writer he became known in about the year 1940 when he walked barefooted and half naked on the roads of Lahore, usually with a cripple boy as his sacred load on his back and picking up all things like the stone, metal pieces, banana peels, nails, horse-shoes and brick bats that may interfere

with the convenience and safety of vehicles and public. His humanitarian activities justified the renewal of his acquaintance and casual visits of the writer to the place of his activities.

Though unable to have academic education within the four walls of a regular educational institution, Bhagat Puran Singh, on account of his inborn zeal, has by constant personal effort, acquired a vast amount of knowledge on various topics and in the words of Principal Teja Singh "has reached the highest level of thought through practically associating himself with the realities of life". This passion of learning he manifested very early and is associated with an equally great enthusiasm to spread light of knowledge among others. He has, therefore, accumulated a large collection of books and old copies of several journals. The number of books and journals is evidently sufficient for running a small library and a reading room.

In the main ward is housed another section of the publications, and printing press which has to its credit not less than sixty books, booklets, pamphlets, posters and placards. Looking at the wide range of the subject of his publication, it can be said without exaggeration that his printing department is verily a transmitting station of valuable information for the guidance and reconstruction of man and society.

Original in its concept, the institution represent a natural outcome of an irresistible urge of Bhagatji to do his best for the poor and helpless patients, who cannot gain admission into the hospitals. Such an idea could, as a matter of fact, take its birth in the mind of a poor man only and not a rich man, because the approach of each, to such a social

problem, is radically different. A rich person always thinks in terms of endowing money and running his own independent hospital, self contained in every respect. He thinks of providing his own doctors, his own equipment with medical or surgical apparatus, an aspect of the hospital, which is very costly as it eats a lion's share of the hospital's maintenance funds. This is all very well in a place, where there is no hospital. But in a central city like Amritsar, where a highly equipped hospital exists, what is needed by the common man, is not another equally selfcontained hospital, but greater boarding facilities, so that he may be able to avail himself of the outdoor treatment provided by the central (standard) hospital. The question of opening another hospital at one place arises only when the existing facilities for outdoor treatment are exhausted, since extension of outdoor facilities in a well-equipped hospital costs only a fraction of the outlay necessary for an additional hospital. This, according to Bhagatji, is the *raison-de-etre* of Pingalwara and a suggestion for the consideration of rich persons, interested in founding hospitals for public good.

Another contention of Bhagatji is that howsoever rich a man may be and howsoever great his endowment, in the matter of establishing or running a hospital, he cannot compete with or equal the collective effort of society. Puran Singh's resourcelessness had led him to the finding of a solution that has surpassed that of the wealthiest man with his big endowment. In his resourcelessness he could not think of any big endowment of money but the afore-said two ideas, which are greater than big endowments.

The problem of sickness in our country is awfully large. The helpless and the homeless patient dying

on the roadside is a very common sight with us. In the city of Amritsar, by no means wealthier than other cities of India, rather smaller in size than many of them, not even the seat of government, the problem of the helpless patients continued to persist for a long time before the partition of the country. Though very rich and noted for their philanthropy, the people of this city could not dream of the miserable plight of such persons as are now looked after in the Pingalwara. With our people, so poor is the notion of human dignity that the spectacle of a helpless patient dying on the road-side, unattended and uncared for, is taken as the inevitable fate of a human being.

As a man of deep religious feelings and convictions Bhagat Puran Singh has solved this question by invoking and canalising the religious sentiment—a field hitherto neglected even by notable men of all religions. He has thus thrown a challenge to the religious people, to take up earnestly this great neglected cause. This negligence goes to mar the dignity of man and degrades our nation in the eyes of other advanced people. Here is a call not only to the normal ritual charity to divert its flow but also to the daily charity in petty sums of an anna or two. (five paise coin or ten paise coin).

Shree Acharya Vinoba Bhave said the other day that the Indian temples played a very significant part in the social and cultural life of India. This Pingalwara is a temple of God without any idol or a representative religious symbol of God installed in it. The only symbol of God in the Pingalwara is the destitute bodily helpless man. The aim and chief function of the Pingalwara is the care of the physically helpless people, whether in the grip of infirmity

or old age or afflicted with sickness. But in view of its educational activity, the institution is also a social laboratory wherein the solution of many a social problem is not only discovered but from where it is also broadcast with an effective and original method of publicity. As such, this kind of temple represents a great effort of intelligent humanitarianism and is destined to play its own role in the cultural history of the country.

It is unfortunate that the word Pingalwara coined by Bhagat Ji, does not fully convey the scope of its various activities and, for some people, creates a queer impression, such as that of a 'leper asylum' but the word is gaining a household currency in Northern India. The appalling shortage of beds in the hospitals is resulting in pushing a constantly increasing number of patients to the Pingalwara which in Northern India, is now shouldering a central burden and as such is entitled to obtain help from all persons in the region. However, further to enlist the sympathy of the public a good deal of publicity work has to be done in the territory. For this, more funds are required since the income, though apparently large, is not keeping pace even with basic expense of Pingalwara and the inevitable gap not only keeps the standard of service in the institution too low but also leaves little margin for further developmental work, including publicity, for which Bhagat Ji has to make special efforts to secure funds from persons interested in this sort of work.

Puran Singh's Pingalwara is truly a nucleus of a great humanitarian movement. In the words of Principal Teja Singh it is "an island of Gandhism in the midst of clamorous politics and show."

BHAGAT PURAN SINGH AND HIS PINGALWARA

Diwan Anand Kumar M. A.

Formerly Vice-Chancellor, Punjab University,
Member University Grants Commission, Govt. of
India.

I have known Bhagat Puran Singh for more than 35 years and have many opportunities to observe his career from close quarters. I have found him to be unusually inspired for social welfare work. His life is a life of renunciation, dedication, self-abnegation and self-limitation. His only hobby, in fact his only aim in life, is wise, pure and creative altruism and in this connection no social work is too small to be beneath his notice. Beginning with small things like the covering and removing of dirt and the picking of banana peels, nails, horse-shoes and broken pieces of glass etc. from the path, his activities extend to great humanitarian causes like the Pingalwara.

His unalloyed and inborn zeal for social welfare work has today landed him to a great cause of social welfare, namely the cause of the aged, infirm, disabled and sick persons. This work which he started from his early youth in the shape of his care for individual sick and disabled persons has today in course of time grown into such a great volume that it no longer remains an individual's affair and deserves the attention of one and all. This cause which calls for small monetary donations from all citizens has been built at the cost of great toil and his youthful

ambitions. In fact he has ignored himself altogether for building up the institution of the Pingalwara.

The Pingalwara has existed in his dreams from his early youth. He conducted the activities of his Pingalwara in its embryonic stage since 1924 under the shade of trees and on the pavements in Lahore. He picked up a cripple child of four years in 1934 from Gurdwara Dehra Sahib, and has been since then mothering him with the tender care and fondness of a parent. He himself leads an unmarried life and finds his parental adjustment as the poor cripple receives all his spare endearments in this peculiar relationship.

He picked up the child in November 1934 and the Pingalwara took its tangible shape in 1948. For fourteen years before the inception of his institution he had to carry the crippled boy in his lap, and on his back, undergoing not only great physical strain but also exposing himself to the ridicule of people. This heroic act of his is comparable with the story of Shravana Kumar in the mythology of India with the only difference that Shravana Kumar paid his debt of childhood to his aged parents while he has been paying the same debt to an unfortunate cripple. The act of carrying about the cripple boy on his back is symbolic of his carrying the whole institution—housing the aged, the infirm, the disabled, the cripple and the sick on his shoulders. Who knew that the unfortunate child who had in course of time grown up to be a boy whom he carried on his back on the roads of Lahore for hours and for miles every day was not his own son but a picked up deserted boy. Walking barefooted and semi-naked with his

incessant burden on his back was a common feature of his daily life in Lahore and who could count his obscurity in terms of a great humanitarian act. I vividly remember him walking from Gurdwara Dehra Sahib Siri Guru Arjan Dev to my office in the University Laboratory and my bungalow at Waris Road Lahore for miles frequently on errands of goodwill for the help and relief of many students and people in need and in distress.

Throughout his relationship with me extending over three decades I have found him to be a most sensitive and self respecting man leading a life of contentment in the midst of his ever growing institution, Pingalwara, involving an expenditure of Rupees three lakhs yearly. I have no hesitation in introducing him to the people of my country as the most sincere worker and I am very proud of being a friend of such a noble soul who, with his love of literature, had also won the affection and regard of my revered father Diwan Bahadur Raja Narendra Nath.

When I look back to the beginning of my acquaintance with Bhagat Puran Singh when he was quite resourceless and semi-naked in the streets of Lahore with a cripple boy on his back 33 years ago, I wonder at the great spiritual development he has attained since then. Outwardly, he has not changed and he is still hugging his cherished poverty but he is richer by far in its concept and execution. In my eyes it is a great dream come true. I proudly share with him, as his old friend his happiness over his superb achievement.

December 12, 1966.

Bhagat Puran Singh

—An Assessment by :
Narain Singh, M. A.

Bhagat Puran Singh loves to call himself a Bhagat, as the term Bhagat prefixed to his name shows it. But those of us who have known him at close quarters, find him more a sewak (servant of the people) than a Bhagat (a devotee of God). Of course, Bhakti, Knowledge and Action, though sometimes accepted as three distinct paths leading to Moksha, cannot be quite exclusive of each other, since an overemphasis of any one of them at the cost of the others leads to undesirable effects. It means all three should go hand in hand, otherwise human personality would be incomplete. A man of knowledge should also be a man of action and the latter, in turn, would be much handicapped if not fired by love, devotion and faith, the three ingredients of Bhakti. Yet, Bhakti is the crown of them all. One can easily see that if a man serves a sick person without possessing sympathy or compassion, it becomes a monotony for him who serves and a burden for him who is served. Why is the mother's service of her child so real? Because it flows out of love. Thus, action to be fruitful should proceed from the inner Divine Source, built up and strengthened by Bhakti, the love of God i. e. one must first build up spiritual power before one acquires fitness for a dedicated service. Becoming and not merely doing a thing is the real achievement. In short, the neglect of the inner life is bound to be fatal in the long run. So long as a man has not conquered his unruly self and established Swaraj there and so long as the mind continues to be swayed by passion and

blind urged he seeks in vain the joy and peace for the inner chambers of his own soul as also the glory of being useful to others.

“ਪ੍ਰਥਮੇ ਮਨੁ ਪਰਬੋਧੈ ਅਪਨਾ ਪਾਛੈ ਅਵਰ ਰੀਝਾਵੈ ॥”

(ਅਸਾ ਮਹਲਾ ੫ ਪੰਨਾ ੩੮੧)

“One must first teach one's own mind before one sets out doing good to others.”

We have made this fine distinction deliberately because we know Bhagat Puran Singh did not being a life of service with that kind of conviction and was therefore not a Bhagat, strictly speaking in terms of the above. Perhaps, he used the word Bhagat for himself in the general sense of a devotee to a cause, which surely he was, though he did not visualise then what exactly was the cause that was going to possess him. The point emphasised here is that he was not a Bhagat as understood in the strictly religious parlance, otherwise he would have started as very much more powerful, spiritually speaking, than he actually was. He would have been more humble, more sweet, more patient and more forbearing. Not that he did not have these qualities in quite a substantial measure even at that stage. The spiritual atmosphere of the holy Gurdwara Dehra Sahib of Lahore, the influence of his parents, specially of his God-fearing mother, and the intrinsic potentialities of his own good soul, had compensated, to a very great extent, the lack of an initial spiritual development. Add to it a circumstance that changed the course of his life entirely. He picked up a cripple child at a point of the road running by the side of Gurdwara Dehra Sahib and he made the child his first love which, in turn, humanised him and turned him into a

passionate lover of mankind, irrespective of caste, colour, creed, country and race. And his humanism, gradually and slowly became spiritual and dynamic because it started to flow, in course of time, from his faith in and love of God. Thus, he is an enigma and a paradox. Whereas, in a Bhakta, the love of God produced the love of mankind, in his case, it was the love of mankind that carried him to the love of God, though mainly, the love, the worship and the service of God had still remained for him to mean the love, the worship and the service of the people and out of this love he built up a Pingalwara in Amritsar around that cripple child, and this same Pingalwara has now grown up into a big institution in service of the sick, the disabled, the forlorn and the suffering people. With this background, his religion too has assumed a new look. As it could not be detached from life, it could not remain just one kind of activity for which time was to be ear marked in the daily routine. No, it was to be a guide in all his activities—social, economic or political. Also, it could not remain a thing of mere contemplation in total isolation from life. In fact, he could not accept a teaching, individualised in out-look and having no social or political embrace. And he was perfectly right. If man is not to remain an isolated brute there is always a battle for the soul that needs to be waged relentlessly. What could be a greater threat to peace than the widening economic gulf between different classes of people or the unending disparities in the social or the political set-up of the land? And, does it not need a conscience to feel the inhumanity involved in these and other glaring inequalities in life i.e. do not people need a soul? Then why

do they talk, at all, of religion? Let us remember that wars always begin in the mind of men and the battle for peace has to provide souls to men. And it is always this battle that becomes a social, an economic or a political problem. It was this kind of realisation that had made Bhagat Puran Singh a fighter. He is now busy producing, in a quiet manner, a huge fund of literature dealing with all aspects of life. Of course, he did not have a good education, necessary for this kind of work but he makes up this deficiency partly by a sustained effort or contact with intellectuals and scholars, for advice, guidance and help. Thus, even without any scholarly pretensions, he is able to produce vast literature in the form of books, tracts, booklets and posters for the service of the common man. Whether fully conscious of it or not, his approach seems to be that the soul in all men is the spark of the Divine and therefore the love and the service of the common man is the truest form of worship. The Sikh Gurus had their mind quite clear on this theme. Guru Nanak, for instance, spoke thus:

ਕਿਸੁ ਪੂਜ ਚੜਾਵਉ ਲਗਉ ਪਾਇ ॥ ੧ ॥
 ਤੇਰਾ ਦਾਸਨਿ ਦਾਸਾ ਕਹਉ ਰਾਇ ॥
 ਜਗਜੀਵਨ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਨ ਮਿਲੈ ਕਾਇ ॥
 (ਬਸੰਤ ਮਹਲਾ ੧, ਪੰਨਾ ੧੧੬੮)

“To whom shall I offer flowers in worship and at whose feet shall I fall? (At the feet of all) and I call myself a slave of all Thy slaves, O Lord; there is no other way except this to meet the Lord of the world.”

SERVICE

Service should be the overflow of an abundant life. Its forms and expression will be as richly varied as that life itself. NO MANUAL then can catalogue the possibilities nor define the range of service. But such a book can be suggestive, can start new veins of thought and activity in those who have the great essential—a quickening touch with the source of life. It is hoped that this book may prove suggestive of some of the avenues of helpfulness that open out on every side to the heart willing man, and that it may be a help in training students to enter intelligently into conscious and co-operative work of bringing about a better society. It is written with the conviction that intelligent and effective community life is one of the real aims of education; that even while a student, each man should make a beginning in understanding the opportunities and responsibilities of citizenship, and that guided attempts at definite practical helpfulness are the necessary condition from which may grow that purposeful thinking and that larger usefulness which should characterise a student's latter life. —Introduction to the book

'SUGGESTIONS FOR SOCIAL HELPFULNESS',
By: D.J. Fleming, M.A., M.Sc., Professor Formen
Christian College, Lahore,

Published by:—G.A. NATESAN & Co., Madras.
CHAPTER—THE OBJECT OF THIS BOOK.

THE CRIPPLES

The cripples are much to be pitied. They cannot walk or work much. They are only half alive and depend on the help of others for many necessary movement and actions. When you walk about in strength and freedom, remember the poor cripples. When you use your hands and limbs for writing, eating or working, remember the poor cripples. Find out how you can serve them. Perhaps they need your aid for getting up, or sitting down, or going downstairs, or crossing the road, or putting on their clothes or cooking their food. Try to help as much as you can.

No life is complete without Personal Service. If you are a scholar, your learning does not exempt you from this duty. If you are an artist, your genius does not absolve you from this sacred obligation. If you are a politician, your political plots and plans do not release you from this moral conscription. If you are a poet, an orator, or a journalist, your work for different "Causes" and "Movements" is not substitute for this self-imposed corvee. I talk to you of living, bleeding, hopeless, helpless men, women and children, not of abstract "Causes" and "Movements". If you are rich, you cannot run away from your hungry or sick neighbour, and say, "Oh, I am giving money to many hospitals and charity societies". On such "patrons" and "philanthropists" falls the curse of Simon: "The money perish with thee". If you devote yourself to literature, you cannot leave the blind in their darkness and the deaf in their isolation, and say: "Oh, I am writing a wonderful book on the progress of civilization, or preparing an eloquent

speech on the Social Insurance Bill, or composing a beautiful poem on the blessings of Mercy. That is my contribution of Service". No, it is not a contribution at all: it is an evasion. If you are an eminent scientist, you cannot neglect the cripples of your borough and say: "I am carrying on valuable research in physiology, astronomy, and botany, and serve mankind in this way. I shall soon discover a new bacillus or a new star". No, even if you discover a thousand new nebulae, y o u r life is incomplete and unblessed, if you refuse to give a little time to the Personal Service of those who suffer. You may gaze at stars through your telescope and entrap bacilli with your microscope, but you need no telescopes and microscopes to see these misery-maddened creatures round you, in your own town, in your own street. Your first small duty is to them, not to the stars and the bacilli. Pay your mite of Service to your unfortunate neighbours, and then begin your great and fruitful work in science, politics, and literature. Thus, and thus only, can you prove that your human feelings are not atrophied. Then you will serve mankind as fully-developed men and women, and not merely as soulless machines for the manufacture of pictures, poems, inventions, theorems, speeches, books, laws, or constitutions. Keats has wisely taught us that moral progress depends on deepfelt sympathy and love:

"None can usurp this height...

But those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest."

Personal Service m u s t be rendered to the defective, the sick, and the poor. Book—
Hints for Self Culture, by Lala Hardayal—JAICO.

“HUMILITY IS MY MACE”

By V.N. Narayanan

The Tribune, March 30, 1991

He looks like the Rishis of old and the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh—a veritable combination of courage and compassion, a total embodiment of unselfishness and service. Bhagat Puran Singh is what India's distilled wisdom and rich heritage are all about.

There he sits, at the entrance of the Golden Temple at Amritsar, with loads and loads of paper around him. In front of him is a brass vessel as non-descript as the man's physical appearance. Visiting devotees to the shrine stop, pay silent obeisance, put some cash into the tray and move on. Bhagat Puran Singh neither seeks nor acknowledges their greetings.

The money piles up, but the sage notes it not, and along comes a seeker and the sage welcomes with open arms.

There is spontaneous rapport and the generation gap is closed. You wonder what this wizened old man has—anything at all—to say and minutes latter there is another kind of wonder: how is it that this frail man of neer-ninety is so well versed in ecology, environment problems, the Tehri dam, Narmada and deficit financing. The words of Guru Nanak in Var Asa flash through the mind;

*“He who attains humility through
love and devotion to God,
Such a one may attain emancipation”.*

“You are from The Tribune? I have reprinted your article on...(he turns to one of the sewadars to open a bundle) The Times of India had a series of articles on this subject...”

Amazing that he should tell a journalist what the journalist had written. Perhaps the transience of journalism acquires the trappings of immortality through not a mass medium but a spiritual one. Bhagatji subscribes to two dozen regional, national and international dailies and magazines—and reads them all!

What obsesses us most—the daily obscenities of politicians and editorial homilies of journalists—does not occupy his attention for more than a fleeting moment. Bhagatji, over the decades, has developed a free for real news, that whice concerns that people, society at large and the values that (ought to) govern it.

As he talks one could see the zeal of a child eager to learn. He is gentle, soft and sublimely uncritical of anything around him. To him, all of God’s creations are sacred, be they animal, vegetable or mineral or whatever. He collects, as he walks along the streets of Amritsar, pebbles, horse-shoes, peculiarly shaped stones, and a lot else...

An important looking SGPC functionary, surrounded by kirpan-wielding assistants and armed guards, passes by. Somehow, the presence of Bhagat Puran Singh with no guards, no security, no paraphernalia seems irksome and out of place. What is the secret of this man’s impregnable security?

Guru Arjan Dev has the answer;

“Humility is my mace;

Touching

The dust on the feet of people, my spear
These weapons no-evildoer can withstand.
The Master, all-endowed, has armed me with these".
(Sorath 80)

The picking of pebbles on the street is very symbolic. After all, for close to seven decades Bhagatji had been picking up human pebbles cast away on the street by a cruel destiny or an uncaring society. God helps those who help themselves; Bhagat Puran Singh has vowed to help those who can't help themselves.

He is the saint of our times. Contemporary history has few names (I have Mother Teresa in my mind when I write this) which can boast of such relentless service to humanity as that of Bhagat Puran Singh.

"Binu sewa phal kabhu na pawasi
sewa karni sari"

Pingalwara is no posh hospital with modern clinical facilities. It contains children of 'lesser gods' than those who bless the rest of us. A visit to it can be depressing. But Bhagatji has no inhibitions; he is the spiritual father to the mentally retarded and the society-abandoned creatures in human form.

Talking to him is enlightening. He has very simple remedies for almost all the nation's ills. All perfectly practical and easily enforceable—but in a nation of Bhagat Puran Singh.

A few public spirited Indians in the USA have started a movement to recommend the Nobel Peace Prize for Bhagatji. He would be the last person

to be enthusiastic about it. He knows the difference between the emancipated soul and the Good Samaritan, the difference that would explain why Martin Luther King's non-violence struggle was worthy of Nobel Award, and why the Nobel Prize is unworthy of Mahatma Gandhi's satyagriha and Ahimsa.

But the prize money—around Rs. 40 Lakh—is welcome if only to house Pingalwara in a better building and with improved hygiene and amenities. Also, the Nobel Prize needs to redeem its honour by going to the right persons. The cause must be taken up by the country at large.

Meanwhile, the saint goes on unworried by the mess caused by our leaders to the country. Bhagat Puran Singh would echo Guru Nanak Dev...

“I have learnt by the light shed by the
Master, perfectly endowed;
Recluse, hero, celibate or sanyaasi—
No one may expect to earn merit
Without dedicated service—
Service which is the essence of purity.

—V.N.N.



Saint of Pingalwara

THE TRIBUNE, March 30, 1991

In our moments of distress we all pray to our gods for help and deliverance. It is rarely that we pray for the welfare of mankind. Bhagat Puran Singh, founder of the Pingalwara movement in Punjab, is so very different that one is tempted to acclaim him as a living saint. He doesn't just pray, but has made it his life's mission to help the helpless. It is the selfless dedication of such men, to the task which society as a whole should own as its own, which helps us sustain our faith in the ultimate triumph of good over evil, of light over darkness. P.P.S. GILL gives a graphic account of the man and his mission.

Bhagatji grew up on the streets of Punjab and to the streets he took literally to spread his mission. What he is today he owes to his mother, Mehtab Kaur, who wanted him to care for the uncared sick and helpless.

ANY observer visiting Amritsar would have noticed the small, sealed black boxed with the words Pingalwara scribbled over them in English, Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu. People insert coins and currency notes into them and go about their business.

Pingalwara, which moved into its present building on the G.T. Road, close to the main bus terminus, in 1957 is cramped, unkempt and needs better care and attention. It is being whitewashed and painted now is another matter. But a majority of its inmates are housed in two separate buildings across the road in Ram Talai and City Centre,

which too are an apology for buildings. What sustains these is the spirit, not the appearance. The real institution is called Bhagat Puran Singh. His life's story can be headlined "intelligent humanitarianism". It is just not the unattended, uncared mentally retarded, raped, sick, infirm and crippled people he reaches out to. He is won't to publish as much material as possible on such themes as ecology, environment, population, pollution and so on. The Pingalwara has its own printing press, which turns out leaflets, folders books and what-have-you in lakhs for distribution either free of cost or at a modest price.

This nonagerarian saint advocates "faithful living" for every one and insists that one should strive to know more and more about every thing. Little wonder, he has got big hoardings written in English and Punjabi on a variety of subjects—religion, faith, morality, ecology, etc. These have been put up at several places, notably at the Golden Temple

Of late, Bhagatji has made the main entrance to the Golden Temple his day time abode, where he sits or squats reclining against steel boxes filled with and stacked with literature. In front of him lies a steel bowl in which people, mostly pilgrims and devotees who visit the Darbar Sahib, religiously put a coin, a currency note quietly touch his feet, fold their hands and pass on. Bhagatji on his part, if he happens to notice someone, returns the greetings with folded hands and absorbs himself in writing or listening to news read out to him. He subscribes to 18 dailies published all over the country.

He is fond of using a "kalam" and "dawat". Those who wish to obtain a receipt or a certificate from him are obliged. Bhagatji scrawls his signature with the "kalam" made of "kana". Shabbity dressed and unpretentious, Bhagatji wears khadi and a yellow shapeless big turban—"paggar". Around him stand "sewadars" who trust a bunch of literature into the hands of all who enter or leave the Temple.

When I met him last week, he explained his mission and stressed that it is the initiation, a spark of creativeness, which helps one take on many uncreative things. What he is today he owes to his mother, Mehtab Kaur, who wanted him to care for the uncared sick and help the helpless. No wonder, he has not only kept his promise for seven decades by remaining a friend of the forlorn but also fulfilled his vow to remain a bachelor.

Bhagatji is now 86. He comes from a village called Rajewal in Ludhiana. He was born in a Hindu family, his father was Shibu Mal. He grew up on the streets of Punjab and in the streets he literally took to spread his mission. Not only does he pick up people but also glass pieces, pebbles, horse-shoes and other projectiles which may hurt a man or an animal.

Though not even a matriculate, he has an insatiable appetite for literature and information. The facility of Dayal Singh library at Lahore proved helpful to him. He started on the present road when he was 19. It so happened that he was entrusted with the responsibility of bringing up a four-year old crippled child abandoned outside gurdwara Dehra Sahib, associated with Guru Arjan Dev, at

Lahore in 1924. Named Piara Singh, that young lad is over 60 years now and is Bhagatji's companion.

Throughout, the crippled little boy, suffering from acute dysentery when first picked up, travelled on Bhagatji's back. Now he is seated in an easy chair near Bhagatji outside the Golden Temple. Piara Singh is dumb and is suffering from paralysis of arms and legs.

For more than an hour that I spent with him, Bhagatji quoted from various books and named authors to hammer home his point. He seemed very fond of Arnold Toynbee, though, he attributes his name's prefix, Bhagat to Mahatma Gandhi, whose writings stirred him.

Pingalwara gives solace to the physically, mentally and emotionally crippled. Its manager, Mr Surjit Singh Rahi, who is also private secretary to Bhagatji, informs me that there is an All-India Pingalwara Society, a registered organisation with a six-member governing body. Besides Bhagatji there are Dr. Inderjit Kaur, Mrs Joginder Kaur, Mrs Darshan Kaur, Mr Mohkam Singh and Mr Sewa Singh.

The annual budget of Pingalwara is Rs 80 lakh, approximately, out of which at least one-third comes in the form of foreign remittances for the inmates. The Punjab Government contributes a small sum of Rs 40,000, while the SGPC gives Rs 1.25 lakh annually. The municipal corporation, which earlier used to contribute Rs 10,000 (later raised to Rs 30,000) has not paid a penny for the past 10 years for reasons best known to it.

The institution now faces housing problem and Bhagatji is keen that the adjoining old tehsil complex

and a ramshackle building of adjacent distillery be made available to Pingalwara. The government is tight lipped and Bhagatji wouldn't ask!

There are separate wings. Pingalwara at present has 150 mental patients out of which 125 are women; there are nearly 90 children, who are mentally retarded, the majority being females. Then there are patients, who have no one to care for them and who required medical attention. Pingalwara, as Bhagatji and Mr Rahi point out, is in fact, a large "boarding house" for the established hospitals in the city to which the patients could be taken for treatment. A visit to the wards shows that some of the patients, who tend to become violent are chained to their beds. The patients are clothed but do not show any sign of having been bathed and cleaned.

The new kitchen building was nearing completion. The attending staff appeared to be uninvolved and interested only in small salaries. But credit must be given to those who spend their time with such patients as have been given shelter in the institution. Bhagatji, despite his age, is very mobile. He regularly visits all the three buildings situated at a stone's throw from each other. His total dedication and control leaves little room for any manipulation by the staff. "One wishes the society also involved itself in the institution", he sighed.

On partition, Bhagatji alongwith his back-sack, Piara Singh, made it to Amritsar and put up in Khalsa Collage refugee camp before moving to a place near the hospital. Finally, after 10 years, Pingalwara got a home of its own in the present premises.

What hurts Bhagatji is the "exploitation" by several others who collect donations in cash and kind from all over in the name of Pingalwara. This must end. Pingalwara has no branches elsewhere excepting at Pandori Warraich village, where another 80 patients are housed. It is opening a home for the aged at Goindwal Sahib and has authorised collection centres at selected places in Punjab.

In northern India, Pingalwara enjoys a reputation and commands respect. Which is why the rich and the not so rich prefer to donate to Pingalwara in the memory of the departed and near and dear ones. Bhagatji knows no ism, caste or religion. His religion is service to suffering humanity. There is nothing below human dignity when it comes to lending a helping hand to a human being.

Bhagatji is never tired of reminding people who meet him how good walking is for health. The minimum prescribed standard for daily walk for a normal person is 8.5 miles.

This sage of Amritsar is to the unattended here what Mother Teresa is to the poor orphans in Calcutta. The difference is resources and exposure.

Samaritan of Amritsar

Khushwant Singh

The Tribune, March 17, 1990

He arrived unannounced without prior warning that he would be in Delhi. It could be discourteous to ask a man like Bhagat Puran Singh why he did not make an appointment. No sooner I opened the door to let him in, I touched his feet.

I don't touch many people feet. Before he launched on his pet theme, he prefaced it with a mild compliment. He was glad that I had not sunk under the weight of worldly belongings, but I was not doing my bit for the environment.

"Why have you not written against the increasing use of motor vehicles, trucks, buses, scooters, three-wheelers? Do you know how they foul the atmosphere with noxious gases? Why doesn't every one travel by train and then on foot. Bicycle or tonga? I am sure if you come to see me in Amritsar, you would drive up in a car."

"Bhagatji, I don't drive long distances any more," I replied trying to make light of his current obsession. "If I were to come to Amritsar, I would certainly come by train."

"And then? From the railway station to the Pingalwara, would you take a tonga or a taxi?"

"Perhaps I would walk. Going to your Pingalwara has to be a pilgrimage. It is best to perform it on foot."

"Walking is the best form of exercise," he proclaimed. He asked one of his colleagues to give me the booklet entitled "Walk your way to Health."

He then proceeded to quote John Ruskin: "Going by railroad I do not consider as travelling at all. It is merely being sent to a place and very little different from being a parcel."

He has precise notions of how much a person of my age should walk every day to keep fit. "A minimum of eight and a half miles per day. Are you doing it?"

I plead guilty. "I hardiy do any walking now. But I do play tennis every morning. And in summer swim every afternoon."

Bhagatji is not impressed by these subsitutes. He has never played tennis, nor, I am sure, can swim. He is a little older than me, much taller and without any ungainly fat on his body. His beard is silver white and flows down to his nevel. Mine is dyed black and tucked under my chin. Nevertheless I look quite a sight in the club bathing pool; Bhagatji in a swimsuit would be a sight for the gods. He has never bothered about his appearance. He always wears a long shirt of coarse "khadi" and a massive, shapeless yellow "paggar" on his head. He must be the worst dressed man in Punjab.

However, Bhagatji hans't finished extolling the virtues of pedestrianism. "All great teachers were walkers—Buddha, Shankaracharya, Guru Nanak, Vivekananda, Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave. It, was and is, the best way to reach people in remote villages."

He tells his assistant to get out more literature out of the boundle. He thrusts them in my hand. The topics range from care of children, nuclear warfare, dowry, harassment of women, drugs, destruction of forests, family planning, Hindu-Sikh unity, unemployment, care of animals.

It gives me the opportunity to take the offensive. "How many trees must have been cut down to produce all these booklets?" I ask him.

"These are to convey important messages," he protests. "I know you write against wasteful practices like sending greeting cards. I published that article. Also your article against the use of wood to burn the dead. But these booklets are not waste of wood."

Bhagat Puran Singh is a most unusual character. Born of Hindu parents he converted to Sikhism while in his teens. He has spent his entire life healing the sick and the destitute of all communities. He had no time to marry or rear a family. In different parts of Amritsar are placed little black boxes with the word "Pingalwara" in Hindi, Urdu, Gurumukhi and English. People put money in them.

When he runs short of cash, he sits himself on the steps of the Golden Temple and asks worshippers for donations. No one says no to Bhagat Puran Singh because they know that every paisa goes to feed the hungry, buy medicines for those who can't afford them. No one in Punjab has within living memory done more for the poor and the destitute than this saintly person. But as with many other good people, he has a kink in him. He must write and publish tracts which few people bother to read. He asked me if I could persuade the Reserve Bank of India to grant him permission to spend a part of the donations he received from abroad for his publications. Or persuade some millionaire like Birla or Tata to finance them. That is one request of Bhagatji; that I'll turn down with a clear conscience.

Bhagat Puran Singh

A Sikh Environmentalist

—Bibi Amrit Kaur

Bhagat Puran Singh is well-known for his selfless service and dedication to the aged, infirm, poor and cripple. He is like an angel to those in suffering, who he cares personally with great love and a soothing touch that heals their bodies as well their souls. His aim is to add dignity and a spark of happiness to their anguished hearts.

His altruistic attitude knows no bounds in social service. His activities of social welfare extend from small things like removing dirt, picking up of banana peels, nails and horse-shoes from roads, to the establishment of Pingatwara, which literally translates to "home of the lepers."

Bhagat Puran Singh has single-handedly strived for and achieved in the streets of Amritsar what Mother Teresa has done in Calcutta. He is fully aware of our limited and diminishing natural resources. He is very aware and knowledgeable about conservation, and its impact on our environment. He is not only very vocal but very practical also. He has published many pamphlets on deforestation and its effects, over-population, recycling material, and enrichment of environment. He himself has used recycled paper for his publications.

In the words of Principal Teja Singh, "Bhagat Puran Singh is an example of a man reaching the highest level of thought, while practically associating himself with the realities of life."

Late Principal Teja Singh M. A.

GENERAL CERTIFICATE

ON BHAGAT PURAN SINGH'S WRITINGS & LOVE FOR LITERATURE

The period of Bhagat Puran Singh's relationship with me is hardly three years. During this period he has been seeing me off and on in connection with his literary activities. In the course of this period I have found him to be inspired with an unusual zeal for social and literary work.

His eagerness has always so switched my intellectual reserves that whenever he has sat by my side I have invariably been invoked to pour out my whole knowledge on any topic of the moment. His presence has always afforded me a relief by giving me an opportunity to give an outlet to my thought which burried deep in memories.

During my whole life including the 40 years of my educational career I have found him to be the only man who has sat by my side as an earnest and most zealous student of literature.

He is an example of a man reaching the highest level of thought through practically associating himself with the realities of life as apart from mere bookish study gleaning borrowed truths which always carry with them musty stench of aged. His truths are discovered not from books, but from active throbbing life. He is an example of learning by experience in the best Indian traditions of Malabari (Parsi) Bhai Pheru and Nawab Kapur Singh. He has revived those Sikh legends which had become almost unbelievable. In this respect his example will serve as a beacon light for all aspirants emerging from low stations of life.

He has created a new front, that of healthy literature, that provokes new thoughts, stirs up new emotions, gives new urges for active good. He has launched a new campaign of social welfare through publicity the beginnings of which are developing into great heights.

His work in the cause of the submerged humanity—the aged, the infirm, and the sick is not only monumental but original in conception destined to go down in the annals of the social history of India.

—Principal Teja Singh 22/3/75.

Puran Bhagat Departs

By Khushwant Singh

The Indian Express, August 15, 1992

I am glad I wrote a tribute on Bhagat Puran Singh while he was still alive. I hope somebody read it out to him while he was in the intensive care unit of the P.G.I. in Chandigarh.

A few days after my column on him appeared Ranjit Singh Narula, retired Chief Justice of the Punjab-Haryana High Court came to see me with his very pretty grand-daughter, Reema (nee Anand Chaddha. She had made a short film on Bhagat Puran Singh and wanted to record a three minute introduction to it. "Bhagatji is on his death bed," said Narula, "so we should have the film screen as soon as possible." I agreed to do the recording next morning. The evening Bhagat Puran Singh died. He was 88. My introduction became an obituary homage.

What distressed me most was the scant notice taken by our media of the passing of this truly great man. Although Doordarshan announced it that night and all Punjab papers carried the news with his photographs on their front pages, only one national dailies **The Indian Express** mentioned it and that in six short lines at the bottom of its third page. Surely all our papers have Punjabis on their staffs who could have told their illiterate editors that Bhagat Puran Singh was no ordinary mortal but undoubtedly the most loved and revered man in northern India! I once described him as the bearded Mother Teresa of Punjab. Mother Teresa had the backing of the Powerful Roman Catholic church, the English press and innumerable foundations to give her money. Bhagatji had nothing except his single-minded dedication to serve the poor and the needy. And yet he was able to help thousands of lepers, mentally and physically handicapped and the dying. His name will be written in letters of gold in pages of the history of the Punjab.

Remembering A Sage

V.N. Narayanan

The Sunday Tribune, August 1, 1993

On an August day (next Thursday) will come the first death anniversary of Bhagat Puran Singh, the sage of Pingalwara (Amritsar). The last few weeks of this servant of the hapless and the forlorn were full of pain, which reminded one of the suffering of Christ on the Cross. The day after his passing into eternity was the sixth day of this month. Pasternak says in "Zhivago's Poems": "You walked in a loose crowd. /Then someone remembered/ That by the Old Calendar/Today was the sixth of August, /the Lord's Transfiguration." Was it a coincidence or a manifestation of the Supreme Will? This great man is not dead. He lives on amidst the suffering people, transfigured and immortalised. He did not work miracles. But he did reveal, in word and deed, the power to transform lives, alleviate pain and lift up such hearts as are hurt, depressed and disconsolate. We remember him respectfully because he was different from most of us: he worked recklessly but splendidly to show us how not to make yesterday's cup of bitterness "more full with the pain of today." He sought to shake society out of its sloth, not with aimless fury but with deliberate effort, and found for grief the panacea of service, humility and compassion. He had immersed himself in the teachings of the Gurus. He had imbibed the essential Gandhi as he had assimilated history and the distilled wisdom of the centuries. There was no fretting or regretting.

His was a life well-lived. Ours are lives spent in the settling of scores and in the settlement of accounts. He was a Bhagat (a devotee), Puran (whole) and Singh (a lion). Few names suit a person so aptly. The lion-hearted devotee wanted us to realise what the Rishis have commanded us to be; Be thou whole. The rest is immaterial. "People are my God," he said. He worked for their well-being. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else matters for an unfragmented person like him. He did things in great sweeps. He had the choice of working in certain spheres which promised comfort, money and material satisfaction. He chose a path which brought him all these "gains", but not for himself. What personal consideration would matter to a man who had learnt to remember this; "Truth is our mother, justice our father, pity our wife, respect for others our friend and clemency our children; surrounded by such relatives, we have nothing to fear"?

The curvilinear movement of life took him from his place of birth in a well-to-do Hindu family of Ludhiana, through hard times and with little formal education, to Gurdwara Dehra Sahib in Lahore. His mother had prepared him for the daunting tasks ahead. A crippled and mentally retarded child, spotted by him near the gurdwara, confirmed him in his mission. As Jesus founded his church on Peter, his rock, Bhagat Puran Singh laid the foundation of his Pingalwara on the ennobling presence of this beloved child named Piara Singh. Lahore's Dyal Singh Library helped him in self-education. The inhuman condition thrown up

by the country's partition led him to the ideas of organised and institutionalised patient-care.

All forms of handicap could be treated and mitigated, he said. No stigma was irredeemable, he taught. Hundreds of unbearable lives were made worth living by him. Women and children were the man beneficiaries of his "God-guided" plans. He inculcated in people the habit of giving until it hurt. Pingalwara became a metaphor of help in a world full of misery. The institution has grown and become the centre of a service movement. Will it remain so? No one knows the answer. His death could not destroy Bhagat Puran Singh. The deterioration of his institution can do so. Our duty to the Pingalwara (s) is clear. The sage told us that abandoning the instinctive pursuit of self-interest, man must cultivate the higher instincts of sympathy and mutual help. We felt supremely happy by achieving the political miracle of freedom on the quicksand of social slavery and inner corruption. This teacher of ours warned us against viewing historical surprises as the roots of our troubles. The strength of the many must conquer the sufferings of the few. Finite man has infinite capabilities; realise this; work; suffer; mitigate suffering... Bhagat Puran Singh's thoughts should form part of the process of our daily examination of conscience.

SGPC award in memory of Bhagat Puran Singh

The Indian Express, August 15, 1992

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) has announced that it would initiate an award for social service in the name of Bhagat Puran Singh, the founder of Pingalwara (a house for the destitutes) and also raise the contribution of the SGPC to Pingalwara from Rs 1.5 lakh to Rs 3 lakh. The amount of the yearly award would be decided at the meeting of the SGPC.

Paying rich tributes to the services made to humanity by Bhagat Puran Singh, the SGPC chief, Mr Gurcharan Singh Tohra, said he was a symbol of humanity who sacrificed his life to serve the destitutes, orphans, crippled, and mentally retarded persons. His status was equivalent to Bhai Ghaniyaji who served even soldiers of the enemy, injured in various Sikh wars.

Earlier, Mr Tohra presented a siropa to Dr Inderjit Kaur, adopted daughter of Bhagat Puran Singh, who inherited the running the Pingalwara. Mr Shamsheer Singh Verka, convenor of the Punjab Freedom Fighters Association, read a message on behalf of the Punjab Chief Minister Mr Beant Singh.

Mr Simranjit Singh Mann, president of the Akali Dal (Mann), paying homage to the departed soul, said that Bhagatji did not marry because he wanted to serve humanity rather than serving his own family members.

Mr Parkash Singh Badal, president of the Akali Dal (Badal), said that we should learn from

the humble ways of Bhagatji who did not ever experience hate because he loved human beings, serving them with whatever little he could offer them. He begged in his life to help solve the sufferings of others.

Mr Harinder Singh Khalsa, secretary of the SGPC, said that Bhagatji always shunned publicity and even ceremonies organised to honour him for recognition of his contribution to help solve the sufferings of orphans. Mr Khalsa said that it was surprising that the state government kept mum all these years and ignored Bhagatji.

Among others who paid homage included Bhai Manjit Singh, president of the AISSF, Mr Kabul Singh, president of Akali Dal (Longowal), Mr Dev Dutta, senior vice president of the BJP and Mr Kirpal Singh, former president of the Chief Khalsa Diwan.

Thousands gathered at the Manji Sahib hall at the Golden Temple complex here where the antim ardas was performed on Friday.

Puran symbolised selfless service

The Hindustan Times, August 7, 1992

One could spot him anywhere—at the Pingalwara near the general bus stand in Amritsar, around the Golden Temple or at any major festival in gurdwaras across Punjab and Haryana. Clad in a loose kurta pyajama and wearing an untidy saffron turban, he would sit cross-legged, distributing for a farthing some very useful literature that would shock you, educate you and seek the milk of human kindness out of you. Most of this literature on helping the poor, the infirm and the insane and on environment and on cleanliness and also on bhakatvani is printed either on newsprint or on the other side of typed or printed paper.

This elderly man with a flowing beard was Bhagat Puran Singh. Yesterday when he died at the P.G.I. after a prolonged illness, a legend died with him—a legend of selfless service and devotion. He sought nothing, just alms from the public to run his Pingalwara where 500 destitutes took shelter. They were well looked after with food and clothing by a band of dedicated sewaks.

One could also spot out the black steel boxes outside mandirs and gurdwaras and near bus stands. One could come across his sewaks with these boxes, inside trains and buses urging some contribution. You may or may not give, no grudge on the face. A simple request and that was all and, people, quietly put in their contribution.

Bhagat Puran Singh born in 1904 in a small village, Rajewal, in Ludhiana worked in Lahore. It was his mother, Bibi Mehtab Kaur, who inspired him to serve the infirm and the sick. At the age of 16, he took to selfless service and continued till he breathed his last. He had gone only half way to primary level, yet one could discuss national and international affairs with him. One could debate philosophy and religion. He did not marry, but adopted a young girl, Inderjit Kaur, who now looks after his whole home for the sick.

For years, Bhagat Puran Singh carried a sick man, born infirm, on his shoulders and for decades he nursed him, cleaned him, fed and dressed him. He was a paralytic from the day one. "Where the most dear ones leave, Bhagatji picks up and serves without any expectations. He was the true child of God." This is how people in Punjab describe him.

Operation Blue Star hurt him deeply. But he turned his sadness and anger, if at all, into total service to humanity. This correspondent had a long discussion in 1985 on the Punjab crisis and found he had some very profound ideas. He regretted that sincerity and devotion were becoming rare. But there was no rancour. He was the embodiment of quiet affection for all.

In June, Bhagatji fell sick and was operated upon in a nursing home in Amritsar. Later, as his condition worsened, he was brought by air to Chandigarh. Doctors did their best to save him.

Bhagatji is no more, but his Pingalwara would be there for those wishing to help the disabled and the sick.

Bhagat Puran Singh

I.J. Singh, New York University
The Sikh Vision, Summer 1992

History remembers those who have discovered that to give meaning to life one must transcend one's own immediate concerns. The causes that we passionately care for define us. In fact, we owe much to this world, it owes us little. It is in giving that we receive. Some like Mother Teresa recognize this truth and the world rightly honors them.

Every age has known such men and women. In strife-torn Punjab in India, one such man has towered over others for the past 50 years. Puran Singh, affectionately known as Bhagat Puran Singh is now 86 years old, and in the evening of his life. The mission that he embarked upon in 1924 when he was a callow youth of 19 remains even now, the focus of his life, occupying all his energies and his unflagging devotion.

At 19, when youthful concerns are usually more immediate, Puran Singh realized that: 1) India's poverty was awesome and beyond the government's ability to cope and, 2) If one could appeal to Man's nobler instincts, a tremendous force for good could be unleashed.

In much of India even today, the only fate for a severely handicapped person is abandonment; a quick death is more charitable. In 1934, Puran Singh adopted a four years old crippled child. This was the beginning of a life-long mission to serve and save the millions of India's crippled people. His resources were meager, and many times he had to carry the crippled child on his back from place to place. He was subjected to public ridicule. But he persisted. He cajoled and harangued people into

donating for his cause. Puran Singh adopted more handicapped children, his facilities grew. His one-man mission became an institution—Pingalwara (Home for the crippled)—the first of its kind in Punjab, and the first such non-sectarian facility in India. Pingalwara became a tangible reality in 1947.

Puran Singh's Pingalwara, for the past 50 years, has provided what is often the only succor for the helpless, the handicapped and the homeless. Pingalwara now provides a haven for 380 severely handicapped, including mentally retarded patients. Of these 188 are women, 18 are children. A paid staff of 250 provides essential services. Pingalwara also runs an active educational programme. It published on a variety of subjects often given short shrift in developing nations. For instance, the Pingalwara Press has published numerous booklets on topics such as the Arms Race, Oil crisis, Environment, Population explosion, Forestry, impact of Industrialization, etc. Seventy Pingalwara missionaries distribute free of charge thousands of pamphlets and other literature on social issues throughout Punjab, but do not preach any religion.

The landscape of Punjab is dotted with crudely constructed collection boxes bearing the Pingalwara name and logo. The rich and the poor alike contribute coins, goods and services as their spirit moves them. In a country as poor as India, Pingalwara's collection boxes remain sacrosanct; they are rarely rifled or looted. In 1966, the average monthly expenditure at Pingalwara was over Rs 3,00,000. Now 25 years later, the annual budget is Rupees 9,000,000. Of this sum, 250,000 are received as an annual donation from the Shiromani Gurudwara

Prabandhak Committee, which is an India-wide organization that manages historic Sikh temples. About Rupees 440,000 come as contributions from abroad, particularly the United Kingdom, Canada, Malaysia and United States.

Bhagat Puran Singh's dedication to the handicapped and to community service springs from the same source as Mother Teresa's. Whereas Mother Teresa's devotion is based in her abiding devotion to Christianity, Bhagat Puran Singh's selfless service is rooted in his faith and deep reverence for Sikhism. He has translated the Sikh teaching of love and service to mankind into a credo of action.

Bhagat Puran Singh has been widely honored in his home country. In 1980, the Indian government awarded him the Padam Shree. He returned it in 1984 after the Indian government's invasion of the Golden Temple. The Punjab government awarded Puran Singh its 'Lok Kala Academy Award' in 1981. The Punjab Human Rights Organization presented the 'Bhai Ghanhaya' award in 1991, and the Indian government again acknowledged Bhagat Puran Singh's achievement by the 'Harmony Award' in 1991.

Bhagat Puran Singh has sought donations for his cause but has not craved personal recognition although he has been inundated with it; in fact, he has shunned public adulation for his efforts.

LOVE MEANS SERVICE

"Those who love the Lord, love everybody."

—Wadhans

"There can be no love of God without active service".

—Japji

"We should do active service within the world if we want to attain everlasting bliss."

—Sri Rag

As I saw Bhagat Puran Singh

Amrit Kaur (U.S.A.)

The Sikh Vision, Summer 1992.

It was a cold and foggy morning of December 26, 1991, when I went to Sangrur, Punjab, to meet Bhagat Puran Singh who was convalescing there after a month long illness. Ordinarily, he lived in Amritsar. My heart was throbbing as it was the first time that I had met a man of his stature.

As I entered his room, I saw an old frail man in wrinkled clothes, a big loose turban tied around his head, lying in a large crumpled bed. My mind registered a slight wave of shock; Is this the man we want to get nominated for 1992 Nobel Peace Prize? But pretty soon my doubts vanished into thin air as different facets of his multi-dimensional personality unfolded before my very eyes.

Bhagat Puran Singh is a voracious reader, an avid thinker and an effective educator. His room was flooded with pamphlets, books, and newspapers. He brings out many publications on such varied subjects as family planning, democracy, youth education, road disasters, and Sikhism. It is an inconceivable thought that in a remote tiny town of Punjab, one can be so concerned about issues of universal interest.

He is an environmentalist who not only preaches but practices also. He is fully aware of our continuously dwindling natural resources. At times, he talks idealistically about preservation and conservation of natural resources to save the environment. I was taken by surprise when told that he would

never travel by bus or car if he could reach his destination by train in order to save gas to prevent pollution. His eccentricity has generated a new method to reuse wasted computer paper. Bold messages to save the environment are printed on that waste paper for the benefit of the visually impaired.

Bhagat ji was very articulate and one looks in sheer wonder at his face when he starts quoting extensive passages in English by western authors. He is equally spontaneous in quoting from Gurbani and other scriptures. One just has to see Pingalwara to appreciate his enormous love for literature. Selected quotes are scrawled on walls, cupboards, and every other possible place.

Deep down in his heart, Bhagat Puran Singh is a man full of love and kindness. While talking to me, tears rolled down his cheeks as he fondly spoke about his crippled, adopted son affectionately called 'Lula' who was in Amritsar at that time. Bhagat Ji has a burning passion to alleviate the sufferings of others. He established an institution called Pingalwara; a monument to selfless service. He not only feels satisfaction and joy but also pride in this noble work. He has adopted many children, victims of the 1984 tragedy. He is an apostle to the sick and afflicted. It would not be an exaggeration to mention here that Pingalwara has become a place of pilgrimage for both Sikhs and non Sikhs alike.

He is deeply indebted to his mother for being a role model of service and planting the same seed within him. The selfless spirit of service, coupled with a keen desire to leave a clean world for genera-

tions yet unborn, has earned him the nomination for the coveted Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

He is deeply religious and regards himself to be extremely fortunate to be living at the doorsteps of Shri Harmandar Sahib. His profound faith has strengthened his commitment and dedication to the humanity he serves without any distinction of caste, creed or sex. He is a true Sikh in the real sense for he symbolizes complete harmony in thoughts, words and actions.

It was deeply moved to see the devotion and love of people for Bhagat Puran Singh who surround him and work for his cause. They are in awe and admiration; full of gratitude for having an opportunity to exercise their religious beliefs. They revere him as the living saint of the modern times whose life is welded with love, care, concern, knowledge and polished by humility and service.

My head bowed in admiration for this man of great magnitude who is so scientific and modern in thinking yet so deeply rooted in the soil of our glorious history, culture and religion.

My Glimpse Of A REAL MAN

The learned can write about the learned; the godly can write about the godly; and I am neither.

What words can my limited thoughts produce which can pay tribute to a learned and godly man.

I had the honour to meet Bhagatji only twice at Pingalwara. The first experience was of astonishment, that this poorly clad, frail man was Bhagat Puran Singh. Around him was an environment containing and epitomising the ills and evils of our world—and here was a single soul, this humble mendicant, seeking in his own way to soothe, to help, to allay some of those ills of humanity. I wondered at how this could be possible by one individual.

On my second visit, he personally took me around two wards, and printing press and I had my glimpse of the “real man” within the simple rustic body the world saw. From him emanated a pure love for all those unfortunate beings around him, and with that love, the caring service he gave them. From him also emanated a tranquillity in fulfilling the role God has chosen for him in this life.

And I realised that it certainly was possible for one individual like Bhagatji to give love and care and comfort to so many deprived human beings by his very dedication and single minded pursuit of selfless service.

Such men come seldom to this world, but when they go, they leave their immense fragrance behind, and a path for us all to follow.

USHA PARTAP SINGH
Guru Hari Farm, New Delhi-110030

Mrs. Usha Partap Singh has been intimately close to late Bhagat Puran Singh and is an honoured benefactor of Pingalwara Ashram. She spreads awareness among the people around her of the dedicated services of the Pingalwara being done unto the suffering mankind. The management is delighted in publishing the foregoing treatise of her homage to Rev. Bhagat Puran Singh on his passing away.

Brief Bio-data of Dr. Bibi Inderjit Kaur

*(Life-President of All India Pingalwara Society
(Regd.) Amritsar)*

Born on 25th of January 1942, Dr. Bibi Inderjit Kaur had her early education in Sangrur. After qualifying successfully for her M. B. B. S. Degree in 1967 from Patiala Medical College, she served as a gazetted doctor for about four years. After quitting the government job, she joined the clinic, her father Dr. Harbans Singh was running then at Sangrur. Dr. Harbans Singh remained a perpetual source of inspiration for Dr. Bibi Inderjit Kaur. Doctor Sahib meticulously shaped her character to imbibe the higher values of life in a natural and matter-of-fact way. Piety and self-sacrifice were to be her sheet anchor. The great message of Bhagat Puran Singh reached her during the early shaping year through her learned father.

The first spiritual contact between Bhagat Puran Singh Ji and Dr. Bibi Inderjit Kaur took place in 1975 when Bhagat Puran Singh Ji went to participate in the Bhog ceremony of Dr. Harbans Singh. The meeting between the two pious souls, held under tragic circumstances, had, however, a positive side, too. The instant spiritual rapport Dr. Bibi Inderjit Kaur made with Bhagatji was to be a turning point in her life. In 1980 Bhagat Puran

Singh Ji suffered traumatic illness and was later operated upon. Dr. Bibi Inderjit Kaur rushed to Amritsar and took complete charge of his failing health. Like a devoted daughter she looked after Bhagatji day and night and nursed him back to normal health.

The filial bond between the spiritual father and the devoted daughter grew stronger and stronger because they shared common concern for the poor, aged, handicapped, disabled and mentally retarded brothers and sisters. Her visits to Pingalwara at Amritsar were more frequent and her spiritual communion with Bhagatji became more meaningful and elevating experience.

Realising through his safe instincts the great potential of his devoted daughter, Bhagat Puran Singh drafted Dr. Inderjit Kaur as a trustee of Pingalwara Society. After the death of S. Mehar Singh, the then Vice-President of the Society, Dr. Bibi Inderjit Kaur was nominated the Vice-President of the Pingalwara Society. In 1986 itself Bhagatji prepared a will according to which Dr. Bibi Inderjit Kaur was to be the Life-President of the Pingalwara Society after Bhagatji's death. This was the culmination of the complete trust Bhagatji reposed in her to continue the legacy of selfless service to the suffering humanity.

In July 1992, Bhagat Puran Singh Ji suffered a stroke of fatal illness and was shifted to the P.G.I. Dr. Inderjit Kaur attended upon him day and night

and prayed for his recovery. But fate had destined otherwise. Bhagatji breathed his last on 5th August, 1992.

On the occasion of the Bhog ceremony of Bhagat Puran Singh Ji on 14th August, 1992, the Trustees of All India Pingalwara Society unanimously elected Dr. Bibi Inderjit Kaur as its Life-President. It was a befitting tribute to the memory of a legendary 'Mother Teresa' of Punjab.

**Expenditure for 1996-97
(Per Month)**

General kitchen and food expenses	Rs. 1,65,000
Medicine	Rs. 1,40,000
Clothes, sheets, etc.	Rs. 1,00,000
Salaries of those directly involved in patients' care	Rs. 3,60,000
Milk and yoghurt	Rs. 70,000
Hygiene and laundry	Rs. 65,000
Building repair and maintenance & Assets.	Rs. 4,00,000

APPEAL

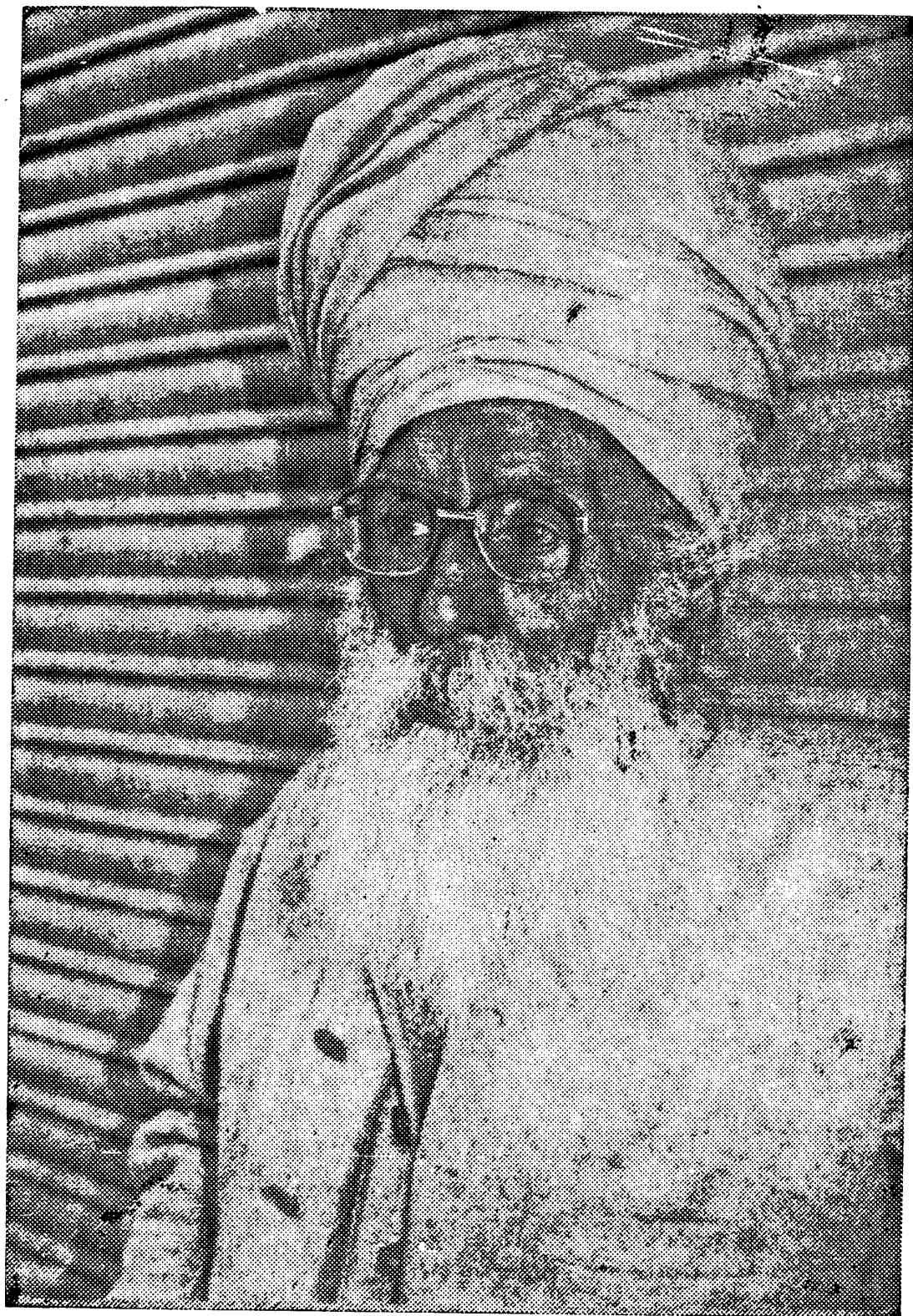
TO BENEFACTORS OF MANKIND FROM
ALL INDIA PINGALWARA SOCIETY (Regd.) ASR.
Founded by: **BHAGAT PURAN SINGH JI**

PINGALWARA Ashram was established with a humble beginning in the holy city of Amritsar—barely 30 km away from Indo-Pak border—on August 18, 1947. It was initiated by the Samaritan saint Bhagat Puran Singh Ji, in a refugee camp meant for Hindus and Sikhs expatriating from Pakistan in the wake of the partition of the sub-continent. Today, the name of Pingalwara Ashram is known all over the globe for its dedicated services unto the suffering mankind which are carried out with the same zeal with which it was started by Bhagat Puran Singh Ji. Pingalwara is engaged in the service of humanity irrespective of distinctions of religion, caste or creed. It has practically no source of funds but the kind donations sent by kind-hearted patrons dwelling far and near. Today, the strength of the inmates amounts to about 560, comprising of the orphans and patients of mental retardation and other ailments of serious and incurable nature. The daily expenditure incurred on the care and maintenance of these patients, the education of young boys and girls, and the remunerations of the 'sewadars' of the Ashram is to the tune of Rs. 65,000. Naturally, this great task, initiated by Bhagat Puran Singh Ji, can't be carried out with the succour and co-operation of the compassionate hearts.

All the patrons and well-wishers of this institution are humbly requested to extend their monetary help as much as they can in order to contribute to the elevated and noble cause of redressal of pain and agony on earth.

The donations from our benefactors shall be thankfully received through the authorised fund collectors, by M.O.'s, Bank Drafts, Cheques etc.

Inderjit Singh 'Baghi',
Hony. Chief Administrator.



BHAGAT PURAN SINGH JI (1904—1992)

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